

CLAIMS:

1. A computer program product for operating an electronic mail application on a first computer, comprising:
  - a computer-readable storage medium including computer-readable program code
- 5 for operation on the first computer and embodied in the storage medium, wherein the operation of the computer-readable program code comprises:
  - accepting an incoming electronic mail message sent by a sender using a second computer;
  - providing a user interface, wherein the user interface comprises a message display
- 10 including information regarding the incoming electronic mail message; and
- displaying a status of the sender in the display.
2. The computer program product of claim 1 wherein the storage medium is selected from the group consisting of a CD-ROM, a floppy disk, a fixed hard drive, a removable hard drive, an optical disk, and a server storage device for downloading the computer program product to a customer computer over a communications link.
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3. The computer program product of claim 1 wherein the electronic mail message comprises information regarding the subject of the electronic mail message.
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4. The computer program product of claim 1 wherein:
  - the incoming electronic mail message is one of a plurality of electronic mail messages listed in the display; and
  - displaying the status comprises providing a status indicator in the display for each
- 25 of the plurality of electronic mail messages.

5. The computer program product of claim 1 wherein displaying the status comprises indicating at least one of the states selected from the group consisting of an on-line state, an off-line state, a do-not-disturb state, and an accepting real-time messaging state.

5 6. The computer program product of claim 1 wherein the operation of the computer-readable program code further comprises providing a messaging initiator in the display to initiate real-time messaging with the sender.

10 7. The computer program product of claim 6 wherein the operation of the computer-readable program code further comprises providing a reply initiator in the display for initiating the creation of a reply electronic mail message addressed to the sender.

15 8. The computer program product of claim 1 wherein displaying the status comprises: determining the electronic mail address of the sender; and comparing the electronic mail address of the sender with a list of messaging system contacts to determine the sender state of the status indicator.

9. The computer program product of claim 8 wherein the list of messaging contacts is maintained by a messaging system contacts server.

20 10. The computer program product of claim 1 wherein providing the user interface comprises providing a user interface for an electronic mail application running on the first computer and wherein the message display is an incoming message window for electronic mail.

25 11. A messaging system for indicating a status of a sender of an electronic mail message, comprising:

a client computer; and

an electronic mail application, running on the client computer, for receiving the electronic mail message and comprising a user interface to display information regarding the electronic mail message, wherein the user interface indicates the status of the sender.

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12. The messaging system of claim 11 wherein the status comprises at least one state selected from the group consisting of an on-line state, an off-line state, a do-not-disturb state, and an accepting real-time messaging state.

10 13. The messaging system of claim 11 wherein the user interface comprises an incoming message window, the electronic mail message is one of a plurality of electronic mail messages listed in the incoming message window, and the incoming message window comprises a messaging initiator to initiate real-time messaging with the sender.

15 14. The messaging system of claim 13 wherein the incoming message window further comprises a reply initiator to initiate the creation of a reply electronic mail message addressed to the sender.

16. The messaging system of claim 11 further comprising a messaging system server  
20 in communication with the client computer.

16. The messaging system of claim 15 wherein:  
the electronic mail application determines the electronic mail address of the sender;  
the messaging system server maintains a list of messaging system contacts; and  
25 the electronic mail application compares the electronic mail address of the sender with at least a portion of the list of messaging system contacts to determine the status of the sender.

17. The messaging system of claim 16 further comprising a hidden contacts file stored on the client computer wherein the hidden contacts file is updated by repeated transmissions of at least a portion of the list of messaging system contacts to the client computer.

18. The messaging system of claim 16 further comprising a sender computer, for use by the sender, in communication with the messaging system server.

10 19. The messaging system of claim 18 wherein the status of the sender is determined by the messaging system server and stored in the list of messaging system contacts.

15 20. The messaging system of claim 19 further comprising an approved contacts file stored on the sender computer wherein the messaging system server receives the approved contacts file to determine if the client computer is authorized to receive the state of the sender.

21. A method of using an electronic mail application running on a client computer, comprising:

20 providing an incoming messages window;  
receiving an electronic mail message from a sender;  
displaying an indication of receipt of the electronic mail message in the incoming messages window;  
determining a state of the sender; and

25 displaying a status indicator, corresponding to the state of the sender, in the incoming messages window.

22. The method of using the electronic mail application of claim 21 wherein displaying the status indicator comprises indicating at least one of the states selected from the group consisting of an on-line state, an off-line state, a do-not-disturb state, and an accepting real-time messaging state.

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23. The method of using the electronic mail application of claim 21 wherein displaying the status indicator comprises displaying the status indicator at a location in the incoming messages window corresponding to the location of the indication of receipt of the electronic mail message.

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24. The method of using the electronic mail application of claim 21 wherein determining the state of the sender comprises comparing sender information obtained from the electronic mail message with a list of a plurality of contacts, wherein each of the plurality of contacts is a member of a messaging system.

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25. The method of using the electronic mail application of claim 24 further comprising communicating with a messaging system server to access the list of the plurality of contacts.

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26. The method of using the electronic mail application of claim 25 further comprising: storing at least a first portion of the list of plurality of contacts on the client computer in a first contacts file; and

updating the first contacts file by receiving repeated transmissions from the messaging system server.

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27. The method of using the electronic mail application of claim 26 further comprising contacting the messaging system server to update the first contacts file, wherein contacting the messaging system is initiated by receipt of the electronic mail message.

5 28. The method of using the electronic mail application of claim 26 wherein the first contacts file is hidden from a user of the client computer and further comprising storing at least a second portion of the list of plurality of contacts on the client computer in a second contacts file, wherein the second contacts file is visible to the user and comprises a list of approved contacts authorized by the user.

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